What Does It Mean To Be Human?

Notes From Those Who Came Before

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Anthro-Links

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Introduction: Why We Ask This Question

When I started Anthro-Links, I knew I wanted it to be centered around people and their stories. I wanted it to feel human. I wanted it to feel like sitting down with someone, really listening to them, and letting them speak about the life they have lived in their own way. That is what made this project so meaningful to me from the beginning.

The main question at the center of Anthro-Links is simple, but it is also very big. The question is: What does it mean to be human? I think what makes this question so powerful is that everyone can answer it so differently. There is not one perfect answer. There is not one definition that works for every person. Instead, the answer changes depending on what a person has lived through, what they value, what they have lost, what they have learned, and what they still carry with them. That is part of why I kept coming back to it. The more people I asked, the more I realized that the question stays the same, but the answers can be completely different.

What made this project even more special to me was that these conversations were with elders. I think there is something really meaningful about asking this question to people who have already lived through so much. They have had time to grow, to lose, to love, to work, to reflect, and to understand life in ways that younger people often have not yet had the chance to. That does not mean every older person has the same perspective, because they absolutely do not. But it does mean that when they answer this question, they usually answer it with a kind of depth that only

comes from time. A lot of these conversations did not feel like interviews in the usual sense. They felt more personal than that. That is part of what stayed with me the most.

As I kept doing these interviews, I started noticing certain patterns. People talked a lot about love, belonging, faith, sacrifice, grief, memory, and starting over. Even though every life was different, some themes kept appearing again and again. That really stood out to me because it showed that while people may live very different lives, there are still certain things that connect them. People want to feel loved. They want to feel useful. They want their life to mean something. I think that is one reason this project affected me so much. It reminded me that human beings are different in so many ways, but they are also connected by some of the same needs and questions.

This book came from that realization. After speaking with so many elders and writing blog posts based on their interviews, I began to feel that these stories belonged together in a larger way. Together, they were creating a bigger picture. Each person answered the same question, but in their own voice, from their own history, and through their own experiences. When all of those voices are placed next to each other, they begin to say something even more powerful. They show that being human is not one thing. It is many things at once.

I also wanted this book to preserve something. A lot of the stories in here hold memories, traditions, and ways of thinking that can easily be lost if no one takes the time to ask, listen, and write them down. That mattered to me a lot. Sometimes I think people assume wisdom will always be there, but it will not if people stop making room for it. This book is one small way of making that room. It is one way of saying that these lives matter, these voices matter, and these reflections deserve to be taken seriously.

Something else that became very clear to me while working on Anthro-Links is that asking people about being human often leads them to talk about the parts of life that mattered most to them, not necessarily the parts that looked the most impressive from the outside. People talked about caring for others, losing people they loved, holding onto faith, working hard, surviving difficult times, and trying to stay kind. That was really important because it reminded me that a meaningful life is not always built out of big public achievements. A lot of the time, it is built out of the ordinary choices, repeated over and over again, until they shape a person's life. That is why this book means so much to me. It is a collection of what people chose to hold onto when they looked back at their lives. It is made of stories, but it is also made of values, memories, and lessons. Each chapter focuses on a different part of what came up in these conversations, but all of them connect back to the same central question. What does it mean to be human?

I do not think this book gives one final answer to that question, and I do not think it is supposed to. What it does give is something more honest. It gives many answers. But all of them are real. And I think that is what makes them meaningful. More than anything, I hope this book makes people slow down for a moment. I hope it makes them listen more carefully, not only to the people in these pages, but also to the people in their own lives. And I hope it leaves them thinking about the question for themselves too.

Because after all of these conversations, I do not think being human is only about existing. I think it is about connecting, remembering, loving, enduring, and trying to understand each other a little better. That is what these elders gave to this project. They gave their honesty, their memories, and their lives. This book is my way of honoring that.

Chapter 1: Sense of Belonging

One thing I kept noticing while working through these interviews was how often people returned to the idea of feeling a sense of belonging, even when they were not using that exact word. Some people talked about their family. Other people talked about where they grew up, the traditions they still hold onto, or the values that shaped them when they were young. A lot of them were really talking about the same thing. They talked about what grounded them in their different life stages. They were talking about what made them feel connected to something other than just themselves.

I think that is part of what makes belonging such an important part of being human. People want to feel tied to something that is real. They want to know where they come from, what has shaped them, and what they still carry with them after everything in life has changed. Belonging is not always supposed to be dramatic. It can be a family recipe, a language, a town, a childhood memory, or even just the way a person was taught to care for others. But, even when it looks small from the outside, it can still shape an entire life. The three people in this chapter all understand belonging a bit differently, which is part of why I wanted to place them together. Their lives are not the same at all, but each of them shows that belonging is about identity.

The first person I want to talk about is a woman I will call Elena. What stood out to me right away about her story was how much responsibility was part of her life from the beginning. She

grew up in a small farming town and was the oldest of six kids, which meant that helping was never optional. She woke up early, helped her mother, carried water, and still made the long walk to school. When she talked about those years, I did not get the sense that she was trying to make them sound beautiful. She wasn't trying to romanticize them either. She was honest about how hard they were. But at the same time, as she spoke about that life, she made it clear that those years gave her something very important. I think what they gave her was a very deep sense of connection to other people. She grew up in a place where everyone knew each other, and even though that kind of life came with some limits, it also came with a sense of closeness. People were involved in each other's lives. They shared burdens. That kind of environment shaped how Elena saw the world. It taught her that a person is not meant to live only for themselves. You can see that clearly in the way she became a teacher. She did not just teach the lesson and go home. She cared about her students in a way that went beyond just the classroom. If a child stopped showing up, she cared enough to ask them or their parents why. If a student was struggling, she noticed. That part of her story stayed with me because it says so much about how belonging can turn into responsibility. To her, if you belonged to a place and to a group of people, then you had a duty to show up for them.

What I also really liked about her story is that even later in life, after grief and change, she still seems rooted in those same values. She spends time writing letters to her grandchildren, growing her plants, and reminisces about a life where people solved problems together. That detail may seem super simple, but I think it matters. It shows that belonging is also about what people keep choosing to hold onto.

The second person in this chapter, who I will call Ruth, made me think about belonging in a different way. Her story is deeply

connected to history, memory, and education. She grew up in the segregated South, and from the way she spoke about books, you could tell that they were never just books to her. They meant much more than that. They represented access, power, and possibilities. Her parents raised her to believe that education mattered, not only for success, but for opportunity. That belief followed her into college, adulthood, and the many years she spent working as a librarian. What I admire most about Ruth is that she seems very grounded in who she is. She knows where she comes from, and she does not speak about that lightly. Her background is something that shaped her values in a serious way. You can tell she understands that memory matters. The past matters to her. The people who came before her matter. And if she loses that, then she believes she loses something important about herself. At the same time, Ruth's story does not feel like it is stuck in the past. That is what makes it so strong. She shares. She passes things on to future generations. She hosts reading time with her family and she encourages younger people to speak clearly and live with confidence. I think that is one of the most meaningful parts of her story. Her sense of belonging is what makes her so generous. That really stood out to me because sometimes belonging can sound like something private, almost like it is only about holding onto your own identity. But in Ruth's life, belonging becomes something very active. It becomes something that she pushes outward. She uses that memory to help other people stand taller. I honestly think that says a lot about what it means to be human. It is one thing to know your roots. It is another thing to let those roots shape the way that you treat others.

The third person in this chapter, who I will call Carlos, made me think about belonging as something that can move with a person. He came to Texas from Mexico when he was young, and from then on, his life was shaped by two cultures, two languages,

and two versions of a home. What I found so meaningful about his story was that he never made it seem like he had to erase one part of himself in order to build another. Instead, it felt like he learned how to hold on to both sides. When he spoke about family traditions, you could really feel how much they still mattered to him. The music, the food, the gatherings, the religious traditions, all of it still felt alive in the way he talked about it. These were not just memories he happened to have. They still gave shape to who he was. I think that is what made his story fit so naturally in this chapter. He showed that belonging does not disappear just because a person moves. Sometimes it becomes even more important. What I also liked about Carlos is that his story is about adapting. He built a full life in a new place, and he seems proud of the fact that he learned how to live between different worlds without losing himself. That part felt especially honest to me. A lot of people talk about growth as if it only means becoming someone completely new, but I do not think that is always true. Sometimes growth means learning how to change while still keeping the parts of yourself that matter most. There was also one detail in his story that I kept thinking about after I read it. He helps other residents with computers and video calls so they can stay connected with family. I know that might sound small, but I actually think it says a lot. A person who understands how important connection is becomes someone who creates that connection for others. That feels very human to me. When I look at these three stories together, I think each person adds something different to the idea of belonging. Elena shows belonging through her service and community. Ruth shows belonging through memory and passing things on. Carlos shows belonging through culture and staying connected to your roots even when your life changes. Their lives are very different, but they all point back to the same thing. People need connection. They need something that reminds them

who they are. I also think this chapter shows that belonging is not always simple. Sometimes it comes with responsibility. Sometimes it comes with pain. Sometimes it has to survive change, distance, grief, or even history. But even with that, it still matters. It still helps people make sense of themselves. It still gives them a kind of steadiness.

After reading and thinking about these stories, I keep coming back to the idea that maybe part of being human is wanting to be held by something, whether that is a place, a family, a tradition, or a set of values. Belonging gives people an identity, but it also gives them a sense of direction. It helps them know what they carry and what they want to pass on. And in the lives of these three people, that sense of belonging lasted.

Chapter 2: Love

Love is one of the most important parts of being human because it shapes how people care for one another and how they choose to live their lives. In these interviews, love appeared in many different forms, but what stood out to me most was that it was almost never described in a dramatic or unrealistic way. Instead, it was shown through actions, routines, sacrifice, and care. A lot of the people I spoke with did not define love through words alone. They defined it through the things they did every day. That is what made this chapter feel so meaningful to me. Love was not just something they felt. It was something they practiced. I also think love says a lot about what it means to be human because people do not only need connection, they also need to give it. They need to care for other people, to feel cared for, and to know that their life matters to someone else. In a lot of these stories, love was not shown as perfect. It was shown as patient, steady, and sometimes exhausting. That made it feel much more real. The three people in this chapter all show love in different ways, but in each of their stories, love becomes something central. It gives their life purpose, direction, and meaning.

The first person I want to talk about is a man I will call Henry. He spent most of his life working as a postal worker, and his story is very connected to routine, responsibility, and consistency. He came from a working class family and was raised to believe that keeping your word mattered a lot. That lesson shaped the way he lived. He built a life that looked ordinary on the outside, but when

I looked more closely at his story, it became clear that there was a lot of love inside that ordinary life. It was just not always the kind of love people notice immediately. What stood out to me most about Henry was the way love changed for him during the years he cared for his wife while she was ill. He spent almost eight years being her caregiver, and I think that says so much by itself. Caregiving is one of the clearest examples of love because it requires patience, consistency, and a willingness to keep showing up even when the work is difficult. It is not a simple or easy version of love. It is a daily version of love. I think that is what makes his story so strong in this chapter. He shows that love is not always loud. Sometimes it is made of routines. It is made of helping, waiting, staying, and being there. Henry seems like the kind of person who expresses love through duty more than words, and that matters because not everyone shows love in the same way. His love was visible in the fact that he stayed committed during a long and painful time. That kind of love is very real because it asks a lot from a person.

The second person in this chapter, who I will call Nina, shows a different kind of love. Her story is centered on food, family, and tradition. She spent her life baking and feeding people, and from the way her story is described, it is clear that food meant much more to her than just cooking. It was one of the main ways she expressed care. I really liked that about her story because it feels so warm and recognizable. A lot of people show love through words, but a lot of people also show it through effort, preparation, and the act of making people feel at home. What stood out to me most about Nina was the way she sees gathering people together as something deeply important. Her kitchen was always full, not only of food, but of people. That detail stayed with me because it shows that love in her life was very connected to presence. She wanted people together. She wanted them to share time,

conversation, and comfort. The food mattered, but the togetherness mattered too. I also think Nina's story is strong because she does not separate love from work. Baking takes time, patience, and attention. It is not effortless. But that is exactly the point. The effort is part of the love. She is not showing care in a symbolic way. She is doing it in a practical way. She is feeding people, preserving traditions, and creating moments that family members will remember. That is why her story fits this chapter so well. It shows that love can be built into ordinary actions and still be very powerful.

The third person in this chapter, who I will call Mae, shows another side of love, one that is very connected to hardship, faith, and endurance. She was widowed while still fairly young and had to support her family by teaching piano lessons, sewing, and playing music for local events. Her story immediately stood out to me because it shows how love can continue even during grief and exhaustion. She did not only love through emotion. She loved through effort, survival, and the way she kept her home together. What I found most meaningful about Mae's story was that she does not describe herself in a dramatic way. She remembers being exhausted and carrying a lot, but she also speaks about it with steadiness. That made her story feel very real. She loved her children enough to keep going, even when she was grieving and overwhelmed. I think that is one of the clearest examples of love in this whole project. Love is not only affection. It is also my responsibility. It is choosing not to let hopelessness fill the house even when life has become very hard. Music is also a very important part of Mae's story. She played for weddings, funerals, church services, and other major moments in people's lives. That means her life was shaped by helping other people move through emotion. I think that adds something really strong to this chapter because music in her life became another form of care. It was not

only her job. It was also a way of bringing comfort, structure, and feeling to people when they needed it.

When I look at these three stories together, I think each one shows love in a different but equally meaningful way. Henry shows love through caregiving, commitment, and staying present during illness and loss. Nina shows love through food, tradition, and creating togetherness. Mae shows love through endurance, music, and keeping a family going during grief and difficulty. Their lives are very different, but they all show that love is something people do, not only something they say. I also think this chapter makes it clear that love changes depending on what life asks from a person. Sometimes it looks gentle and comforting. Sometimes it looks practical and repetitive. Sometimes it looks like a sacrifice. That is what made this theme feel so real to me. Love was not idealized in these stories. It was live. After reading and thinking through these stories, I kept coming back to the idea that maybe part of being human is learning how to love in ways that are steady and real. Love is in the meal, the routine, the long years of care, the piano lesson, and the choice to keep showing up. These people made love feel less like a big abstract idea and more like a way of living. I think that is what made their stories stay with me the most.

Chapter 3: Living Through Loss

Loss was one of the hardest themes to read through, but it was also one of the clearest. Almost every person I interviewed had lost something important, whether that was a spouse, a version of themselves, a sense of certainty, or years they can never get back. What stayed with me was that no one talked about loss in a simple way. Nobody made it sound like something you just get over. Instead, they talked about how it changes shape over time. It becomes part of how a person moves through the world, even years later. I think that is part of what makes loss such a human experience. It does not just happen once. A person can lose someone they love and still keep discovering new ways that absence affects them. These stories made me realize that grief is not always loud.

The three people in this chapter each helped me understand that in a different way. One carried the emotional aftermath of war and silence for decades before finally talking about it. One lost his wife after a long marriage and had to learn what it meant to keep living when the person who had shared his life was no longer there. The last story is heavy. It is about a woman who lost her husband and then kept choosing kindness anyway, even while carrying that grief with her. All three stories made me think that loss does not only reveal pain. It also reveals what a person is made of.

The first person I want to talk about is a man I will call Daniel. For most of his life, he seems to have been the kind of person

people described as dependable, serious, and tough. He learned mechanical work when he was young, served in the military, came home, opened a repair shop, and raised a family with very strict expectations. From the outside, his life probably looked stable. Daniel's story is not only about war. He carried trauma, guilt, and fear for decades without really speaking about it. That part of his life feels especially important to me because it says something bigger than just his personal story. It says something about the generation he came from, and especially about the kind of masculinity many men were taught to live by. They were told to work, provide, stay strong, and never look too closely at their own pain. What I found most moving about Daniel was not just the fact that he suffered. It was the fact that he eventually began to speak. In old age, after so much time had already passed, he started opening up about the emotions of what he had lived through. He talked about surviving when others did not. He talked about what it meant to hold everything in for so long. And he started encouraging younger people, especially younger men, to say what hurts instead of pretending they are not hurt by it. That matters a lot to me. It would have been easy to leave his story as one about hardness, silence, and endurance, but it is more than that. It is also a story about what happens when someone realizes that surviving is not the same thing as healing. Daniel could fix almost anything with his hands, but for years he did not know what to do with the damage inside himself. I also think his story shows that grief is not always tied to one single event. Sometimes grief becomes part of a person's personality before they even recognize it as grief. Daniel's loss was about the years he lost by not knowing how to speak about what happened to him.

The second person in this chapter, who I will call James, gave me a different picture of loss. His life was shaped by service too, but in a different way. He joined the Navy when he was young,

saw much more of the world than he expected, and later built a career repairing boats and fixing almost anything that needed fixing. He seems like the kind of person who likes routine and takes comfort in doing things with care. Even now, his life still has that shape. What makes his story fit this chapter, though, is the loss of his wife. They were married for fifty five years, which means that grief for him is not just the loss of a person. It is the loss of an entire shared life. When he says that losing her taught him that love does not disappear, it just changes shape. That stayed with me immediately because it feels so simple and so true at the same time. I think what I like most about James's story is that it does not try to make loss sound inspiring in a fake way. He still misses her. That is clear. But he has also found ways to keep living without pretending the loss is over. He is carrying grief, but he is also still participating in life. There is something especially human in that. Loss can make a person feel like time has split in two, the life before and the life after.

The last person in this chapter, who I will call Claire, made me think about loss in an even different way. She spent decades as an elementary school teacher, which already tells you something about the kind of person she probably is. Teaching requires patience, repetition, and a willingness to believe in people even when they do not believe in themselves yet. Even after moving into a residence and dealing with the loneliness that can come with aging, she still helps other residents read and write letters. She still chooses to be useful. What stayed with me most in Claire's story was the way she carries the loss of her husband. She was married for forty two years, which means, again, that grief is not just about one missing person. You can feel it in the fact that she misses him deeply, but also in the way she keeps turning toward other people instead of shutting herself out. That detail really mattered to me. She defines being human as choosing

kindness even when it costs you some time. I think that line says a lot, especially when compared to her grief. It would be understandable if loss had made her smaller, or more focused only on her own pain. But instead, she still reaches out. She still helps. She still pays attention.

I think all three are important because loss does not look the same in every life. It can come with silence, with memory, with routine, or with small acts of care that keep a person connected to the world. Each person learns how to live beside it. Daniel does that by finally speaking what he had hidden. James does it by building a life that still has meaning after his wife's death. Claire does it by continuing to choose kindness and connection even after losing someone she loved deeply. After reading and thinking about these lives, I kept coming back to the idea that maybe part of being human is learning how to carry absence without letting it erase everything else. Loss changes people. And maybe that is one of the hardest truths in this whole book. To be human is to lose. But it is also to keep loving, keep remembering, and somehow keep living anyway.

Chapter 4: Endurance and Starting Over

One of the strongest patterns in these interviews was that so many people had to begin again at some point in their lives. Sometimes that new beginning came after loss. Sometimes it came after abandonment, migration, or a major life change that they did not ask for. What stood out to me was that none of these people talked about starting over like it was simple or exciting. They talked about it in a much more honest way. Starting over usually meant fear, uncertainty, and having to keep going before they even felt ready. That is what made this chapter feel so important to me. It shows that endurance is not just about surviving one hard moment. It is about continuing to build a life after things have already fallen apart.

I also think this chapter says a lot about what it means to be human because it shows how people respond when life does not go according to plan. A lot of people imagine strength as something dramatic or obvious, but in these stories, strength looks different. It looks like making clothes late at night so your children can eat. It looks like crossing into a new country and trying to rebuild your identity while carrying grief with you.These forms of endurance are not loud, but they are very real.

The first person I want to talk about is a woman I will call Marina. Her story stayed with me right away because of how much she had to carry at such a young age. She was married young, had children early, and then found herself abandoned before she was even thirty. That one fact already says a lot

because it completely changed the direction of her life. She did not have much formal education, and she did not have financial support to fall back on. She had children depending on her and very limited options. Instead of collapsing, she started sewing clothes for neighbors from a small table in her kitchen. Over time, her home became a place where she made school uniforms, wedding dresses, curtains, and even funeral garments. I really liked that detail because it shows how connected her work was to other people's lives. She was not just sewing fabric. She was helping mark some of the biggest moments in people's lives while also trying to hold together her own family. I honestly think that is one of the clearest descriptions of endurance in this whole project. Endurance is not pretending nothing happened. Marina also shows that starting over is often tied to sacrifice. She raised four children alone and skipped meals so they could eat. She worked with her hands for years so they could have opportunities she never had. That part of her story felt very human to me because it is not only about pain. It is also about purpose. She was not enduring just for the sake of enduring. She was enduring because she wanted a better future for the people she loved.

The second person in this chapter, who I will call Layla, shows another kind of endurance. Her life changed because of political unrest and migration. She moved to a new country in midlife, which already makes her story different from many immigration stories that focus on youth. She was not beginning as a young person with endless time ahead of her. She was beginning after she had already built a life, already had a sense of self, and already knew what it meant to belong somewhere. Starting over in midlife is not only about learning new things. It is also about grieving the life you had to leave behind.

What stood out to me most about Layla was that she arrived with limited language skills, but still refused to become dependent

on others. She began by making food for neighbors and eventually opened a small takeout restaurant with her children. She took the things she still had, her skills, her recipes, her determination, and turned them into a way of surviving. She could not bring her old life with her, but she could still bring parts of herself. I think food in her story means much more than a business. When everything else changes, the things a person cooks and the way they cook them can become a way of staying connected to home. Another part of her story that stayed with me was the fact that people often only saw her as the woman who cooks, not as the person who had lived a whole life before that. Starting over can make people invisible in certain ways. Layla had already survived displacement, loss, and the pain of leaving home, yet many people around her only saw the role she was playing in front of them. I think that shows another side of endurance.

I think this chapter makes it clear that starting over is rarely clean. It comes with grief, exhaustion, fear, and sometimes even anger. None of these women pretend otherwise, and I think that honesty is what makes their stories feel so real. Endurance is not smiling through pain and acting like everything is fine. It is facing what happened, carrying it with you, and still finding a way to continue. After reading and thinking through these stories, I kept coming back to the idea that maybe part of being human is the ability to rebuild even when life has already changed you. People lose plans, homes, relationships, certainty, and versions of themselves they thought would last forever. But still, they begin again. They make something out of what remains. They did not erase what they had been through. They did not pretend it was easy. But they kept going, and in doing that, they turned endurance into something more than survival. They turned it into a way of living.

Chapter 5: Belief

Belief was one of the most interesting themes in these interviews because it came up in very different ways. For some people, belief was directly about God and religion. For other people, belief was more about the values, purpose, and the things that kept them steady during the difficult parts of life. What stood out to me most was that belief was not something very abstract to them. It was not just an idea they talked about in a general way. It shaped how they lived, how they treated people, and how they understood their own lives. I think that is what made this chapter feel so important. It was something they carried into everyday life.

I also think belief says a lot about what it means to be human because people need something that helps them make sense of life. People go through loss, change, fear, and uncertainty, and belief can become one of the main things that helps them keep going. That does not mean every person believes the exact same thing. In fact, that is part of what makes this theme so strong. Belief can come from religion, but it can also come from service, forgiveness, memory, and the way a person chooses to live. The three people in this chapter all understand belief in different ways, but in each of their stories, it gives them structure to their life.

The first person I want to talk about is a woman I will call Nadia. Her story stood out to me right away because faith is such a clear and central part of who she is. She grew up in a large household in Syria and later moved to the United States after her husband found work in Houston. Even after that huge life change,

faith stayed at the center of her daily life. She prays regularly, keeps a prayer rug beside her bed, recites verses in the morning, and fasts during Ramadan. These things are part of the structure of her life. They show that belief is something active and daily. What I liked most about Nadia's story is that her faith does not feel separated from the way she treats people. Sometimes people talk about religion only in terms of rituals, but her story shows something deeper than that. She believes that loving God and loving people are connected. It is not only about prayer, although prayer clearly matters to her a lot. It is also about kindness, patience, forgiveness, and the way she gives to others. She knits scarves for staff and residents, shares sweets during Eid, and continues to show care in simple ways. I think that says a lot.

Another part of Nadia's story that stood out to me was the way she spoke about how kindness stays the same in every language. I really liked that line because it connects belief to humanity in a very simple but meaningful way. She moved countries, had to adjust to a new place, and still held onto the idea that kindness is something people can understand across all those differences. I also think her story shows that belief can help a person stay connected to home even when life changes a lot. She misses Damascus, and she still carries memories of her old life, but her faith seems to give her continuity. It helps her remain herself. That is part of why I think her story fits so strongly in this chapter.

The second person in this chapter, who I will call Clara, is one of the clearest examples of someone whose life is deeply centered on religion. She talks openly about Jesus, about being forgiven, about reading the Bible, and about how her relationship with God changed over time. That detail felt especially important to me because it shows that belief is not always something fixed from childhood. Sometimes it grows deeper as a person gets older and understands it more fully. What stood out to me most in Clara's

story was that she does not talk about religion like a simple habit. She talks about it like it is the center of how she understands herself and the world. She says that God is always with her, which means she never truly feels alone. I think that is one of the strongest parts of her story because it explains why belief matters so much to people. It can give a person comfort, but it can also give them a sense of direction. For Clara, faith is not only something she practices. It is the main lens through which she sees life. I also noticed that her story has a strong sense of gratitude in it. She talks about becoming more grateful to God as she got older, and I think that detail matters because it shows belief as something that keeps developing.

The third person in this chapter, who I will call Margaret, made me think about belief in a way that combines religion with service. She was raised Catholic, became a nurse, and later served in the Army Nurse Corps during the war. She says that she saw the worst of humanity there, but also the best. That line stayed with me because it shows that her belief was not formed in easy conditions. It was formed while seeing pain, fear, and suffering up close. What I admired most about Margaret was that she seems to understand belief through action. She believes in service, healing, and compassion, and those values shaped her whole life. She never married and says that her patients were her family, which says a lot about what mattered to her. She chose a life centered on care. It was demanding, serious, and emotional, but she still seems to see it as meaningful. There is also something really moving in the way she keeps memory alive. She lights a candle every Christmas Eve for the soldiers who never made it home, and she keeps thank you notes from people she cared for. I really liked those details because they show that belief in her life is tied to remembrance. It is tied to not letting people disappear. It is tied to honoring pain while still choosing compassion. That makes her story feel very

full to me.

When I look at these three stories together, I think each one shows a different side of belief. Nadia shows belief through daily faith, kindness, and the connection between loving God and loving people. Clara shows belief through a personal relationship with God, gratitude, and the comfort of not feeling alone. Margaret shows belief through service and the decision to care for others even after seeing so much pain. Their lives are very different, but belief gives each of them some sort of structure.

After reading and thinking through these stories, I kept coming back to the idea that maybe part of being human is needing something to believe in, whether that is God, service, kindness, healing, or the value of other people. Belief gives people meaning. It gives them a way to understand life when things feel uncertain. It gives them a reason to keep going and a way to stay connected to what matters most. And in the lives of these three people, belief clearly lasted. It stayed with them through change, hardship, aging, and memory. It shaped who they became and how they loved, served, and understood the world around them. I think that is what makes this chapter so meaningful. Belief was not just part of their lives. In many ways, it helped hold those lives together.

Chapter 6: Wisdom and Regret

Wisdom and regret were two of the most interesting themes in these interviews because they showed up together so often. A lot of the people I spoke with had learned important lessons from their lives, but those lessons usually did not come from easy or perfect experiences. They came from mistakes, missed chances, pain, aging, and looking back honestly. Wisdom was not something these people were born with. It came from living, time, and seeing what mattered and also seeing what did not. I also think wisdom and regret say a lot about what it means to be human because almost everyone reaches a point where they look back and start thinking differently about their life. They think about what they would do again, what they would change, and what they understand now that they did not understand before. That does not mean their whole life becomes sad or full of regret. It just means they see it more clearly. The three people in this chapter all do that in different ways. Each of them has a different kind of life, but all three show that getting older can bring a deeper understanding of yourself.

The first person I want to talk about is a man I will call Miguel. His story stood out to me because it is very honest. He spent most of his life working with wood and building things with his hands. He made houses, cabinets, church benches, and other things that lasted. He was proud of his work, and you can tell that craftsmanship mattered a lot to him. He says that wood teaches humility because it has a grain of its own and if you force it too

much, it splits. I really liked that line because it says a lot, not just about wood, but about people and life too. What makes Miguel's story especially good for this chapter is that he talks openly about being a provider, but not always being a good father in the emotional sense. He worked hard, but he also drank too much and damaged relationships with the people closest to him. He is not trying to make himself sound better than he was. He is speaking honestly about the fact that effort in one area of life does not erase harm in another. I think that is where a lot of the wisdom in his story comes from. He understands now that apology does not automatically fix everything. He knows that trying to make things right does not guarantee that every relationship will fully heal. Some of his children forgave him faster than others, and one did not. That detail shows that regret can be very complicated. Sometimes a person learns the lesson, but they still have to live with the damage that was already done. At the same time, I do not think Miguel's story is only about failure. It is also about accountability. He got sober, he tried to rebuild relationships, and faced himself more honestly in old age. That matters a lot. I think one of the clearest kinds of wisdom is when a person stops making excuses for themselves. Miguel seems to understand that now. He knows that regret is real, but he also believes that trying still matters. That is part of what makes his story so meaningful to me. It shows that wisdom is not just knowing what went wrong. It is also being willing to face it.

The second person in this chapter, who I will call Lila, gave me a very different kind of wisdom. She worked as a librarian for many years and built a life centered around books, friendship, curiosity, and independence. She never married and never had children, and some people saw that as something missing in her life. But what I really liked about her story is that she does not seem to see herself through other people's expectations. She

understands her life on her own terms. She reflects on not having children with a mix of peace and wondering. That felt very human to me because not every regret is dramatic. A person may not feel destroyed by them, but they still think about what another version of life might have looked like. What makes Lila's story feel wise is that she does not let those questions erase the value of the life she did live. She still sees her life as rich, meaningful, and full of connection. She thinks a lot about being remembered accurately, not just kindly, and I found that really meaningful. It shows that wisdom is also about wanting truth, not just comfort. She does not want her life reduced into something simple. She wants it to be understood honestly.

The third person in this chapter, who I will call Leo, spent his life as a photographer, capturing weddings, portraits, and local events. He preserved important moments for other people, which already makes his life interesting in this chapter because photography is so tied to memory. But what makes his story especially strong is the fact that while he was capturing moments for others, he sometimes failed to fully live his own life. Leo spent years focused on getting the right image, the right angle, the right moment, and now when he looks back, he realizes that some of those moments were meant to be experienced, not only recorded. I think that is such an important lesson, and honestly one that goes beyond his specific story. It is easy for people to get so focused on preserving life, organizing life, documenting life, or even just managing life that they forget to fully be in it. What I also liked about Leo's story is that he does not hide from that realization. He says openly that his family sometimes came second to his work, and he clearly carries regret about that. At the same time, his story is not only sad. He still has the photographs, the memories, and the ability to reflect. He spends time looking through his work and thinking about what it captured and what it did not.

When I look at these three stories together, I think each one shows wisdom and regret in a different way. I also think this chapter shows that regret is not always a sign that a life was lived badly. People make mistakes, miss things, and realize certain truths late. That is part of life. After reading and thinking through these stories, I kept coming back to the idea that maybe part of being human is learning too late and still learning anyway. That sounds sad at first, but I do not think it is only sad. I think it is also real. People do not always understand life while they are in the middle of it. Sometimes they understand it afterward. Sometimes they only see the pattern once they have lived enough of it. That is what makes wisdom meaningful. It is not perfect, nor is it having all the answers. It is being able to look back at your own life with honesty. They looked back, they reflected, and they found lessons that were not simple, but were reality.

Conclusion

After working through all of these stories, I think the biggest thing I learned is that there is not one correct answer to the question, “What does it mean to be human?”. Every person answered it differently because every person lived a different life. Some people focused on love, while others focused on faith, sacrifice, grief, belonging, or starting over. Even though their answers were different, they all connected in some way because they were all based on real experiences. I also think this book showed me that the most meaningful parts of a person’s life are not always the biggest or most impressive ones. A lot of the people in this book talked about simple things, like caring for family, cooking for others, working hard, keeping traditions, or helping someone when they needed it. These things may seem normal, but they can shape a person’s entire life. I think that is what made these stories so important to me. They showed that being human is often found in the things people do every day. Another thing I noticed was how much people are shaped by what they go through. Loss, change, and difficult experiences affected every person differently, but they also taught them something. Some people became more patient. Some became more faithful. Some learned how to forgive, while others learned how to accept regret. These lessons did not come easily, but they became part of how each person understood life.

Throughout this book, I kept thinking about how every person wants to feel connected in some way. People want to belong to a

family, a community, a tradition, a faith, or even just to another person. They want to feel like their life matters and that someone will remember what they have learned. I think that the need for connection is one of the clearest things that makes us human. At the same time, being human also means being imperfect. People make mistakes, carry regrets, and do not always understand things until much later. That does not make their lives less meaningful. If anything, it makes them feel more real. The people in this book were not perfect, and they did not try to present themselves that way. They were honest about what they had done, what they had lost, and what they wished they could change. I think that honesty is one of the most valuable parts of these stories.

This book does not give one final answer because I do not think one answer exists. Instead, it gives many answers from people who have lived, learned, struggled, and reflected. Their stories are different, but together they create a larger understanding of what being human can mean. I hope this book encourages people to ask more questions, listen more carefully, and take the time to learn about the lives around them. Everyone has something to share, but sometimes they are only waiting for someone to ask. These conversations showed me that when people are given the space to speak, their stories can teach us much more than we expect.